DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 25.03.2025 | Nikola Mikovic

The streets demand justice

Protests rise from Novi Sad to Belgrade. Eighty per cent support the students, yet power remains deaf to their voices

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić seems invincible. Over the past 13 years – during which he has ruled the Balkan nation as first deputy prime minister, prime minister and president – he always managed to find a way out of various political crises.

But will he politically survive the ongoing student-led anti-corruption protests?

A long history of protests

Ever since Vučić came to power in 2012, Serbia has faced numerous anti-government protests. The 'Stop to bloody shirts' mass demonstrations, launched in 2018 following an assault on one of the opposition figures, did not succeed in weakening the Serbian populist leader. Two years later, his Serbian Progressive Party easily won the parliamentary elections, although large segments of the opposition boycotted the vote.

In 2023, following two mass shootings that claimed 17 lives, the country was paralysed by mass protests. The streets of Belgrade, as well as other Serbian cities, were crowded with people demanding justice and accountability for the tragedy that rocked the Southeast European nation. Their anger, however, did not impact Vučić's reign. In late 2023 and early 2024, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party won parliamentary and local elections yet again.

Throughout the summer of 2024, protests were held all over the country, including in small towns and even villages, demanding that the government abandon its controversial plans to allow the British-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto to begin lithium extraction in western Serbia. But the authorities do not seem willing to give up on their ambitions to turn the Balkan nation into what critics labelled as 'Europe's mining colony'.

On 21 February 2025, amid the ongoing student-led protests, reports showed that Rio Tinto applied for a connection to the Serbian electricity grid for the needs of the future lithium mine. This move suggests that, despite the fact that 55 per cent of the Serbian population strongly opposes the lithium extraction in their country, with only 25 per cent in favour, Vučić does not intend to back down easily.

What about the current protests?

Over the past few months, Serbia has experienced near-daily student-led protests, initially triggered by the collapse of the canopy at the entrance to the Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024 that killed 15 people. An apparent attempt by government officials to cover up unsafe construction methods and allegations of corruption have further fuelled public outrage.

Serbia's leader repeatedly showed that he can successfully ignore the opposition and the public outcry. He is attempting to implement the same strategy regarding the students' demands for functional institutions, rule of law and justice for the victims of the Novi Sad tragedy. The students expect the state institutions, namely the judiciary and prosecutor's office, 'to do their job'. But that is easier said than done, as legal prosecution of those responsible for the canopy collapse would almost certainly lead to the top of the government.

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Thus, the students' demands, although distancing themselves from all political parties and party politics, have a strong political connotation. Fully aware of that, Vučić is not rushing to meet their expectations. Instead, he is buying time, likely attempting to secure the support of the Trump administration, and possibly hoping that protests will eventually die down.

Vučić is one of the very few world leaders who has been firmly backed by all four major global powers — the United States (at least during the Biden administration), the European Union, China and Russia. He also enjoys support from large parts of the Serbian population. As such, he does not seem to be afraid of the pressure coming from the streets.

'Walk around as much as you want to, I will not meet any of the demands. Even if there was five million of you', he said in December 2018 during the 'Stop to bloody shirts' protests. Although he did not

repeat those words, he undoubtedly took the same approach during the 15 March rally in Belgrade, which is considered the largest in Serbian history.

Hundreds of thousands of people did not manage to force Vučić to make any concessions to the students. Instead, after a minor incident, the protest organisers decided to call off the demonstration, which sparked criticism on social media, as many protesters had high expectations for the rally.

Vučić, therefore, emerged as the winner. In the coming weeks, he is expected to hold his own mass rally in Belgrade to show his supporters how he thwarted attempts to force a 'colour revolution', a term widely linked to the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, amongst others. As a brilliant political technologist, Vučić is always one step ahead of his opponents — or at least he was until recently. Over the years, he has been advised by Israeli experts on political marketing, who helped him not only win every election but also build a personality cult. It is unclear if they are still on his team. What is certain, however, is that he now resembles a chess player who mirrors the moves as his opponents.

Given their popularity, the students remain the only organised force capable of seriously undermining Vučić's rule.

After the students began holding mass rallies in the cities of Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Niš, Vučić immediately launched his own rallies in Jagodina, Vršac and Sremska Mitrovica. In response to student blockades of universities, he gathered students loyal to him, who blocked one of the central parks in Belgrade, demanding that universities resume operations. Although he seems to mimic their actions, it is uncertain whether he truly sees the students as political opponents.

Over the past four and a half months, the students have never publicly called for Vučić's resignation. They remain focused on the judiciary and prosecutor's office. Their strategy, however, effectively closes the door to their potential participation in Serbia's political struggle, despite 80 per cent of the Serbian population supporting their demands, as polls suggest.

For Vučić, such an approach seems to be a win-win situation, as it allows him to easily deal with a weak and largely fragmented opposition, some factions of which are reportedly under his control. This is why he sees early elections as a potential way out of the political crises. Serbia's government, led by Prime Minister Miloš Vučević, resigned last

Wednesday, with Vučić saying he may call fresh elections in early June.

The students, however, seem to seek fundamental changes to the nation's political system. Given their popularity in Serbian society, at this point, they remain the only organised force capable of seriously undermining Vučić's rule, possibly even leading to his election defeat. The ball is in their court.



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